



A Vision for the Net Generation Media Specialist

MEDIA MATTERS

By Doug Johnson

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In the October 2005 Media Matters column, I examined some of the attributes of the Net Generation (NG) of learners and what an NG media center offers them. In this column we'll turn to the NG media specialist and the learning opportunities he or she provides our tech-loving crop of students.

NG Media Specialists

Both the addition of new technology resources and the continuous changes in existing ones makes locating and using information increasingly challenging. The media specialist's role as "information expert" for students is more important than ever. Helping Net Genners select the right search tool, build effective search strategies, and determine the relevance of found information is a primary job of the NG media specialist. Helping students take the time to analyze the quality of the information despite their desire for rapid responses and reluctance to reflect is even more important.

In "Substantive Searching" (*L&L*, November 2004, pp. 38-43), Joyce Valenza explores the complexities of both the attitudes and behaviors of effective searchers including:

- Knowing what they are looking for and having a plan
- Realizing they have search choices
- Having strategies for evaluating sources
- Knowing about advanced search screens
- Knowing when quality matters
- Having mind tools for organizing materials
- Recognizing the need for an information professional

Net Genners may be adept at pushing buttons, but the NG media specialist teaches them to be purposeful and effective while doing so.

Unfortunately, I've known media specialists whose primary goal is to reduce the number of students using their media center. The availability of online resources makes accomplishing such a goal quite achievable. But unused media programs don't require staffing. The media specialist who truly serves today's students works on interpersonal skills as well as technical skills and designs programs that recognize and honor their learning preferences. The findings of Diana and James Oblinger's *Educating the Net Generation* (<http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen/>) suggest ways to increase our value to students.

An Inductive Style of Learning

The NG media specialist works with students on problem-based research assignments, a natural fit for their preferred style of learning. Helping kids learn how to learn by finding information and putting it to use is the antithesis of the "rote, restraint, regurgitation" methodology that is the mainstay of too many classrooms. An increased emphasis on primary sources—original surveys, interviews, experiments and source documents—gives students a chance to use even more of their inductive skills. And using technology to both find and present information is very much an active, hands-on, applied experience.

Visual rather than Textual Information

The acquisition and promotion of both picture books for younger students and graphic novels

for older ones is a given in NG media centers. And although the current generation of educators may learn best verbally and do (rightfully) value print resources, the NG media specialist provides information in a wide variety of formats including analog and digital video, pictorial and aural resources, and the technologies through which such resources can be viewed or heard. The media specialist also recognizes that this generation of Ken Burns wannabes enjoys communicating visually as well. The media specialist helps teach students how to take and edit digital photographs, create digital movies, create multimedia presentations and serves as the visual literacy expert in our schools, teaching students how to critically examine visual information.

Meaningful Learning Experiences

For many students, research of primarily academic interest (literary criticism, historical research, non-applied science investigation) is seen as irrelevant and unimportant. But it is not just academically oriented kids who need good information and problem-solving skills—all learners need these skills to meet both vocational and personal needs. The media program and its resources have long been a resource for students seeking information for personal, day-to-day needs. The same student reluctant to research an aspect of the U.S. Civil War willingly practices information problem-solving skills to

figure out the best video game to buy. The NG media specialist finds ways to combine academic assignments and personal interests to reach all students. A student who is interested in hunting may get excited about comparing the firearms used by the North and South in the Civil War if guided by a skillful NG media specialist, hopefully in collaboration with the classroom teacher.

Group Work

The NG media specialist fosters student collaboration both online and in the media center. The days of the shushing librarian are over. Although the media specialist still works to maintain a physical environment that is conducive to learning, he or she recognizes that conversations are the stuff of genuine involvement and provides the tables, conference rooms, and labs where those conversations can take place. The media specialist helps make available and teaches students to use collaborative tools such as wikis, discussion groups, and blogs.

Need for Rapid Results

By working both in the virtual and physical world, the NG media specialist helps meet today's students' anytime learning needs. Net Genners tend to be impatient and want to be able to learn outside of school. The Net Generation media specialist is, of course, available during schools hours and can help students with questions then, but he or she can do "virtual"

reference as well by providing his or her e-mail addresses and responding to questions electronically (perhaps with a disclaimer about an approximate turnaround time). The media specialist facilitates timely interlibrary loan of information contained only in physical formats (and teaches the skills needed to access the library collections that contain them).

A Welcoming and Safe Environment

Not all students are comfortable in our classrooms and hallways. Bored in classes, intimidated in common areas, these kids need a place where they are welcome, safe, and valued. The NG media specialist above all else creates a program that serves students who are diverse—economically, culturally, and academically.

A frightful quote was given by a middle school student in the Pew Interent report *The Digital Disconnect*: "The Internet is like a librarian without the bad attitude or breath" (http://www.pewinternet.org/report_display.asp?r=67). But if the NG media specialist provides resources, facilities, and learning opportunities that are uniquely suited to the Net Generation and has a genuine appreciation for their unique attributes and talents, he or she will be valued in return by this "next greatest" generation. And this in turn is a good thing for the profession as these students become parents, teachers, school board members, and legislators themselves.

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